

Capitola, Central fire merger a step closer

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SANTA CRUZ — Central Fire District Chief Harry Rowe said he was cleaning out his garage the other day when he came upon a stack of papers dating back to 1972 dealing with a proposed merger of Capitola, Live Oak and Soquel fire districts.

"All you'd have to do is change the dates," says Rowe. "The concerns are the same."

Capitola eventually backed out of those consolidation talks because of concerns over local control and the fear that the station in Capitola Village might eventually be closed.

Live Oak and Soquel went on to consolidate into Central Fire District.

Today, directors of Capitola Fire District are hoping to meet as soon as possible with representatives of Central Fire to complete the three-way merger planned so many years ago.

Wednesday an alternate plan to reorganize Capitola Fire as a subsidiary of the city of Capitola was shot down by the Local Agency Formation Commission.

Capitola Fire currently is an independent special district, with boundaries somewhat larger than the city of Capitola. It is administered by an elected board of directors.

During discussion before the LAFCO board, the two main issues again were local control and the possible loss of a fire station in Capitola Village.

LAFCO Chairman Gary Patton said that any merger between Central and Capitola must address those issues before LAFCO would approve

the consolidation.

"We can take care of those concerns real fast," said Rowe after the meeting.

Currently Central Fire board members are elected at-large. If Capitola were included in the boundaries, there would be nothing to preclude one, two or all board members to hail from that city. Or it's possible in upcoming merger discussions that some set number of Capitola representatives may be fixed.

As far as village fire protection is concerned, Rowe has said all along that a station will always be manned in or near the village.

Consolidation talks will begin immediately, according to Capitola Fire board Chairman Max Kludt. He and Dick Mendonca of Capitola will meet with Ron Peterson and Russ Borelli of Central to map out the merger.

In voting down the Capitola city proposal, LAFCO directors said they believe consolidation is the best method of improving fire protection without increasing cost.

A private consultant hired by LAFCO concluded it would cost the city of Capitola about \$600,000 a year to provide the same level of service that Central could at no cost.

Nonetheless the Capitola City Council is hesitant to let go. City Manager Steve Burrell asked LAFCO to delay their decision Wednesday so the city could conduct its own cost survey.

LAFCO Director Ann Soldo of Watsonville wanted to give the city more time, but the other five directors felt the issue had been adequately studied.